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WILL YOU BUY MY MOVIE?
A STUDY OF THE FILMS PURCHASED FOR DISTRIBUTION AT THE
SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2014

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2014

ABSTRACT

Robert Redford created the Sundance Institute with the intention of helping filmmakers outside of the Hollywood system hone their craft with assistance from established industry professionals. Today, the Sundance Film Festival, held every year in January, provides an opportunity for independent filmmakers to sell their films to distribution companies and get their name out to executives in Hollywood. Through research of the festival's history and content analysis of the most popular films from the last twenty years of the festival, I argue that the festival has become increasingly more commercial and that the films purchased for distribution share similar characteristics to each other in large part because major Hollywood studios and distributors have caused a change at the festival and are now dictating what audiences want to see.

Keywords: Sundance Film Festival, independent film, film distribution, film studies

Dedicated to independent filmmakers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I am so grateful for my advisor, Dr. Ted Hovet. I would not have completed this project without his constant encouragement, advice, and motivation. I would also like to thank Dr. Dawn Hall and Professor Lisa Draskovich-Long for their assistance as my second and third readers. I could not have asked for a better thesis committee.

I would like to thank my wonderful parents, brother, and best friend for their continuous support when I was stressed or anxious about this experience as well as my roommate and thesis cohort Brenna. These lovely people kept me sane and helped me see that the completion of my thesis would be a meaningful and insightful part of my college career. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Honors College, Student Government Association, and the School of Journalism & Broadcasting for helping fund my research.

Finally, thank you to *Parks and Recreation* and *The West Wing* for being the happiest television shows to have on in the background as I wrote my thesis. These two brilliant shows inspired me to power through the difficult times and complete this project.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Sundance Film Festival celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, and the festival has certainly grown since it started in 1984. In 1985, the festival screened eighty-six films and had an official staff of just thirteen people (“Festival History”). Today, the Sundance Film Festival is now considered one of the top five film festivals in the world in addition to the Cannes Film Festival, the Venice Film Festival, the Toronto Film Festival, and the Berlin Film Festival (Craig and Tatham 59). Since 1985, over five thousand films have screened at the Sundance Film Festival; by 2013, the festival staff had risen to 232 people with 193 films selected for screening and more than 45,000 people in attendance (“Festival History”).

Combining the U.S./Utah Film Festival with Robert Redford’s Sundance Institute made the festival a place for independent filmmakers who could not find a home in Hollywood. In its humble beginnings, the festival was barely taken seriously by people in the film industry. Over the last thirty years, the festival has become culturally significant in American entertainment, with films screening there first and then going on to have great success afterwards. Many Sundance premieres have seen profits at the box office and then gone on to receive Academy Awards nominations. While once ignored by Hollywood, today the festival is crowded with Hollywood stars and businesspeople looking to find the next popular film. With the festival’s name now synonymous with

quality and entertainment, movie trailers and DVD boxes are now stamped with the “Sundance Film Festival Official Selection” seal of approval. Film audiences and professionals in the industry have taken notice of the Sundance Film Festival, and in a way, altered it from its original mission.

This thesis attempts to understand how the Sundance Film Festival has interacted with the film industry over the last thirty years and how it has become the most popular American festival and one of the most well-respected and beloved film festivals in the world. Research on film festivals is lacking. Those in charge often protect the inner workings of them, and it is only through an analysis of the history and the films that one can come to a conclusion about the ever-changing content selection of a festival and the films that find success there. Through in-depth examination of select films, this thesis will show that, as the Sundance Film Festival has grown, obvious changes have been made in programming. Certain films have become more popular than others at the festival, signaling a change in the marketplace that challenges the very definition of “independent film.” This change can be traced back to 1994, one of the most important years in the festival’s history because it would eventually cause a major shift in the independent film distribution industry.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY OF THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

On a cold January day in Park City, Utah, in 1994, *Go Fish*, a black-and-white movie about a group of lesbians living in Chicago, was the talk of the Sundance Film Festival. With film distributors lining up to see the highly anticipated film, the Sundance Film Festival was about to change in a major way. When the film festival began in 1978, then called the Utah/U.S. Film Festival, it struggled to find its voice in the international film industry. With the help of 1989's *sex, lies, and videotape*, 1992's *Reservoir Dogs*, and now *Go Fish*, the Sundance Film Festival was going to become the place to be in January for people in the film industry. *Go Fish* featured an unknown cast and was written and directed by women with little-to-no film experience, and it explored a topic generally ignored by major Hollywood studio films: the gay and lesbian community. The film's content pushed back against what most considered acceptable at the time, and the use of innovative film techniques helped show the festival attendees that *Go Fish* was different. Most importantly, though, the film was made for just \$15,000. It was truly independent, novel, and daring. By the close of the festival on January 30, 1994, it would make history as the first film purchased by a distribution company while the festival was still running. This would change the festival in a major way—it would eventually alter the business of the independent film industry and how people viewed the Sundance Film Festival forever.

Despite changing the future of the Sundance Film Festival, the success of the independent feature *Go Fish* at the Sundance Film Festival was a far cry from the traditional business model of the film industry. In this model, Hollywood studios would make multiple films a week and disregard the independent filmmakers. In the early days of the film industry, an age commonly referred to as the “Golden Age of Film,” film was “the principal mode of paid entertainment for the vast majority of America” (Epstein 3). Six major film studios (Paramount, Warner Bros, Universal, MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Columbia) controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of all films. Filmmakers outside of this system were rare but could work in the industry, “so long as they were not too independent and their pictures reinforced rather than challenged or changed the dominant notions of value and quality in feature filmmaking” (Schatz 406). When independent producers did want to make their own movies, they still greatly depended on the major studios in three vital areas: studio space; top personnel, including stars, directors, writers, and crew; and theaters to release the films (Schatz 176). Because of this, if people wanted to work in the film industry, they had to start in an entry-level position at a studio, despite any skills or film ideas they already had. Each studio had certain actors and actresses under strict contract, essentially meaning that performers could not select which films they wanted to do. Studios were able to produce films at a relatively low cost and did not have to spend large amounts of money on advertising. The studios relied solely on ticket sales for profits and received a high return-on-investment due to their budget efficiency and mutual understandings with other studios on what films they would produce.

The classical studios had “a consistent system of production and consumption, a set of formalized creative practices and constraints, and thus a body of work with a uniform style—a standard way of telling stories, from camera work and cutting to plot structure and thematics” (Schatz 8-9). Each studio had a genre of movies that they produced. For example, Universal was known for producing horror movies and Warner Brothers made action movies and melodramas while MGM “favored romantic melodrama and light comedy set in a contemporary milieu populated by glamorous, sophisticated characters” (Schatz 43). Each film followed the studio’s general formula and style. The main goal of each studio was to develop as many films as possible in the most efficient way. It helped that each director and actor was required by contract to work on the films. The star-genre formulas of each studio were “among the greatest cultural accomplishments in an age when art and industry, commerce and technology [were] so inexorably wed” (492).

With virtually no competition for the audience’s dollars, the studios were able to maintain their control over film production and distribution as well as the stars until the late 1950s. However, a number of creations sent the studio system into a decline. This included the start of industry unions, which encouraged actors, writers, directors, and below-the-line crew members to break free from the studios and work as freelance artists (Schatz 300). The invention of a new competitor, television, also fractured the studio system when it entered the market. For just the one-time fee of the television set, this new medium offered an entertainment alternative at a low cost to Americans. They were now able to stay home and watch the entertaining stories and news programs they once

watched in a movie theater. This forced the studios into a competitive market and changed the film industry completely (Epstein 12-14).

When home television systems became available to almost every American, Walt Disney changed the studio system. Disney began marketing to young children, and in addition to his popular animated films, began producing toys and other film memorabilia. These products sold rapidly, and soon Walt Disney was making the majority of his profit from the sale of children's toys instead of movie tickets. The studios were sold to larger entertainment companies, and "the movie business itself was now a relatively unimportant part of each conglomerate's financial picture" (Epstein 15). Instead, they now "had to recruit their audience for each movie from television watchers by buying commercial time on network (and later cable) television" (Epstein 96). The high cost of advertising to television viewers meant that companies "now routinely lost money on theatrical release" (Epstein 16). Using advertising to recruit an audience also forced the studios to produce films that would interest a television viewer when condensed to a short trailer. This meant that studios produced more high-spectacle, action-packed films as well as animated films that would attract families and enhance business. Essentially, all studios began focusing on the Disney model: they still produced films but made the majority of their revenue from the sale of film memorabilia items. This led to the "mega-blockbuster" films of the 1970s, the films that would be easy to advertise, sell these toys, and generate the most revenue for the companies (Epstein 12ff).

By the 1970s, commerce "won in the perennial tug-of-war between art and commerce that is Hollywood ... pushing the majors in the direction of 'event' pictures in an attempt to cash in" (Biskind 9). This decade favored the "mega-blockbuster" films

such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), and George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977), all of which were released in multiple theaters throughout the United States simultaneously. This led to widespread success and helped the Hollywood studio executives see the potential in doing so with other major films. Audiences now expected special effects and action instead of the character-driven stories that were once produced. These mega-blockbusters were easily marketable on television and would sell the toys and memorabilia that Disney had, in a sense, created. Because the studios now relied more on the sale of other merchandise than on ticket sales for a profit, only directors interested in this idea of the spectacle film were being looked at by studios. Because of the need for high profit, the character-driven films were often forgotten. The studios may have wanted to make the more artistic films but could no longer afford to if they were now spending millions of dollars on advertising. This meant that the independent filmmakers looking to tell their stories were often marginalized from the industry. What those filmmakers needed was a new business model and a support system for their creativity and artistic freedom (Biskind 8-11).

Two people in Utah recognized that need for an outlet for independent filmmakers and the importance of bringing more filmmakers to Utah. In 1978, the Utah State Film Commission, John Earle, and Brigham Young University film school graduate Sterling van Wagenen decided to develop a film festival for the state and for the country. The goals of the Utah/U.S. Film Festival were to host retrospectives of prominent American films; to provide panel discussions with highly-regarded film industry leaders for independent filmmakers; and "to start a competition where films made outside the Hollywood system could be showcased in the hope of bringing them to a wider audience"

(Craig and Tatham 50). The first Utah/U.S. Film Festival, held in Salt Lake City in September of 1978, was successful but managed to rack up over \$40,000 worth of debt for the state of Utah. They hosted their second festival in 1979 and built on the success from the year before, even eliminating about \$20,000 of their debt.

Still needing some growth for the festival and more importantly, support from the film industry, Hollywood director and actor Sydney Pollack suggested they move the festival to Park City, Utah, in January so it could be “the only film festival in the world held in a ski resort during ski season, and Hollywood would beat down the door to attend” (Craig and Tatham 51). This move drew the Hollywood producers, directors, and writers the festival needed for both financial and moral support. These Hollywood connections would help the festival grow and allow independent filmmakers to develop their craft with assistance from the industry professionals. In January 1981, the third festival, now titled the United States Film and Video Festival, featured more independent films than the prior two years and had record-breaking attendance numbers. Even with this success, the festival found itself further in debt. Not wanting to give up on the festival, the Utah Film Commission managed to acquire some donations to keep it alive. The festival continued to grow, and by 1984, was considered an important part of American film culture, despite management and debt problems. The festival did become an outlet for these forgotten independent filmmakers. It gave them an opportunity to develop and showcase their talents with some of the industry’s most established filmmakers. In 1979, after the second Utah/U.S. Film Festival came to a close, famed Hollywood actor Robert Redford was also developing his own organization to serve the artistic, “outsider” filmmakers (Craig and Tatham 52).

One of Hollywood's biggest myths is that Robert Redford started the Sundance Film Festival. Redford served on the board of the first Utah/U.S. Film Festival, but he had his own idea for how to service independent filmmakers. Despite his fame, actor Robert Redford believed he was an outsider from the rest of Hollywood. He preferred the more artistic films to the mega-blockbusters of the 1970s, and he "understood that the most creative filmmakers were being increasingly shut out of the system" (Biskind 11). Redford decided he wanted to find independent filmmakers a home, and in November of 1979, he invited some close friends in the business to his Utah home "to lay the groundwork for a novel organization that would nurture indie filmmakers" (Biskind 12). Redford wanted to use his celebrity status to help filmmakers who were not established. His institute would help fund artistic movies on a low budget, with the hope of enabling filmmakers to move away from the mega-blockbuster model of the 1970s. As he said, he set out to help the "filmmaker who spends two years making his film, and then another two years distributing it, only to find out they can't make any money on it, and four years of his life are gone" (Biskind 11). By the end of the conference, those gathered had discussed the problems of Hollywood and developed a strategy for helping those shut out by their studios. The vision and plans discussed at this three-day meeting came to fruition in 1981 when Redford opened the Sundance Institute.

Robert Redford's idea for the Sundance Institute was to support independent filmmakers through a different business model. However, his model compared to the classic Hollywood model in one major way: efficiency was key. Redford recognized that filmmakers outside of the system often did not have the funding and resources available to match their creativity. Like in the classical Hollywood system, he hoped that the

Sundance Institute would help filmmakers efficiently make their films, that is, make them as quickly and inexpensively as possible while still holding true to the intended artistic value. While efficiency was key for both systems, they had a number of differences. First, the Old Hollywood system churned out multiple films per week, using efficiency to make the most money on as many films as possible. These films were seen “more as a craft than as an art” (Schatz 104). The Sundance labs were created to help filmmakers make one artistic film at less cost to them. Redford’s efficiency stemmed from the lack of funds of independent filmmakers. Redford and his colleagues inside the Hollywood system were able to donate some money to the cause, but Redford wanted independent filmmakers to have the opportunity to make films without losing their entire savings and falling into crippling debt. These independent filmmakers would only make one film, compared to hundreds each year in the old Hollywood studios, but they would still find ways to make it as inexpensive as possible. The second major difference between the studios was the control granted to the director and screenwriter. In the old Hollywood model, studio executives demanded “authority over production operations” (Schatz 133), including the screenwriter, directors, editor, and actors. The goal of the Sundance Institute was to let the independent directors and screenwriters make the films they wanted to with some assistance from accomplished filmmakers who could help them polish their art. The third major difference was the tension between art and commerce. The old Hollywood studios each focused on one genre, sacrificing a true exploration of art for a profit. The films followed similar formulas and stayed within the studio’s designated genre. Redford wanted films that transcended typical genres and themes and broke a number of film taboos. While the financial aspect was vital to the completion of

these independent films, Redford wanted to promote art first. However, it did not take long for Redford to receive criticism for straying from this mission.

The Sundance Institute began as “a nonprofit organization dedicated to the discovery and development of independent artists and audiences” (“About”), but by 1985, Redford decided to take the Institute in a more commercial direction. The Sundance Institute hosted a number of programs each year for independent filmmakers. The most notable of these programs were the Sundance Labs, held in June. Filmmakers submitted their scripts to the Institute, and those chosen were able to go to Utah to meet with experienced filmmakers who would help them shoot, direct, and edit their films into a final project. At the labs, according to the official Sundance Institute, “each emerging artist was encouraged to take creative risks and to craft a film true to their own, unique vision” (“History”). However, that statement did not seem to truly reflect the environment of the Sundance Institute. Redford expressed his dissatisfaction with most of the work being produced at the Institute labs in the 1980s, leading to a more commercial atmosphere for the labs (Biskind 74ff).

Robert Redford began personally working with the independent filmmakers to produce films he thought were of higher quality. Many expressed concern that he had taken control of the film, saying that “they were being browbeaten into making Hollywood movies by Oscar-winning resource people” (Biskind 76). Many filmmakers complained that they lost artistic freedom over their own films. Filmmaker Tom DiCillo said, “It was insane, destructive, and negative. It was, ‘This is how you get to Hollywood’” (Biskind 77). The Institute seemed to be failing its original mission. Redford’s commercial film background led many to believe that the Institute was still

seeking commercial success over the artistic improvement of the film industry. The Sundance Institute was also plagued with poor management because Redford wanted complete control of the entire organization. He would often hire his friends for positions for which they were not qualified. This led to financial struggles and ultimately caused the Sundance Institute to combine forces with another ailing Utah film entity: the Utah/U.S. Film Festival (Biskind 28).

The 1985 festival combined the Utah Film Commission and the Sundance Institute for the first time. Redford was skeptical of the merger. He was convinced when he realized that the institute needed to focus on more than just development---that “by ignoring marketing, distribution, and exhibition, [the institute] was virtually relegating itself to irrelevance” (Biskind 28). By combining the Sundance Institute with the Utah/U.S. Film Festival, Redford recognized his ability as a Hollywood insider to promote these unique and bold films to Hollywood distributors for a profit to the filmmakers. This gave the Institute another outlet for discovery of independent talent and also allowed the festival to grow in unimaginable ways. The 1985 United States Film Festival management switch was effective. The numbers continued to increase, and future Academy Award winners Joel and Ethan Coen were discovered after their debut film, *Blood Simple*, won the Grand Jury Prize. Attention from the media continued to grow, and now professionals in the film industry were noticing the independent filmmakers the festival produced. Woody Allen even chose to debut his film *Hannah and Her Sisters* at the 1986 United States Film Festival. However, the year 1989 became the watershed year for the festival with the premiere of Steven Soderbergh’s *sex, lies, and videotape* (Craig and Tatham 53). In the first chapter of his book *Indie: An American*

Film Culture, Michael Z. Newman argues that “characters are emblems” in independent cinema and that independent films are inherently, though not always, anti-Hollywood (29). In Steven Soderbergh’s 1989 debut feature, *sex, lies, and videotape*, he uses these two major characteristics throughout his film. Soderbergh’s characters symbolize four different, true, and complex groups of people while his daring script pushes Hollywood’s accepted boundaries.

In Soderbergh’s *sex, lies, and videotape*, his four main characters each serve as an emblem, or representation, of four various types of people. Characters in independent films “have more depth and complexity, are better developed, are truer to life, and are more vivid and compelling than Hollywood characters” (Newman 30). In *sex, lies, and videotape*, Graham visits his former college friend John. Graham pays a lot of attention to John’s wife, Ann. He is genuinely interested in her as a person in a way that her husband is not. However, this kind man has a secret fetish: he likes to videotape women talking about their sexual experiences. Ann is an innocent woman. She is nervous about sex, even with her husband, and does not understand the sexual freedom of her sister Cynthia. Each character in this independent film has a wide range of traits that make each one like a realistic person, meaning that the audience identifies with each character in different ways. While a Hollywood movie like this may have given each character just one important trait, Soderbergh made them three-dimensional, complicated, and real, as Newman says independent filmmakers do.

Soderbergh’s film also represents an anti-Hollywood stance, one of Newman’s criteria for being an independent film. With a low budget and a desire to make the film as realistic as possible, Soderbergh employed a minimalistic and gritty style to his film that

defined the type of form often used by independent filmmakers. When Soderbergh was making his film, few movies made by Hollywood studios were so open to talking about sexual activities. However, Soderbergh released a 100-minute movie in which the characters not only constantly talked about their sexual experiences but a movie in which “sex” is also in the title. By having four deeply unhappy characters with dark secrets, Soderbergh embraces the independent filmmaker way of “a kind of harsh realism, by making films that display the dark realities of contemporary life, and that make demands on the viewer to viscerally experience and come to grips with those realities” (Ortner 29). The honesty of Soderbergh’s characters, and the fact that he claimed this film was semi-autobiographical, asked viewers to open their eyes to these kinds of people and to realize that what they were seeing on screen could be happening with their neighbors or themselves. The film also has a bleak ending, which “can be understood as undercutting the Hollywood norm of leaving the audience feeling good” (Newman 44). Soderbergh and other “indie” directors use these endings to show audiences that life does not always end with a happily ever after.

Steven Soderbergh broke the Hollywood mold with his breakout hit *sex, lies, and videotape*. By daring to discuss a topic that most people shied away from and using more complex characters than the Hollywood blockbusters, Soderbergh showed that these independent films could be successful as well. It helped to bring the Sundance Film Festival the national attention it needed, and it also inspired other independent filmmakers to tell the stories they wanted to tell, no matter how taboo the subject matter may seem to Hollywood. By the end of the festival, distributors could not stop talking about the film.

Steven Soderbergh gave the festival the national attention it needed with his feature film debut *sex, lies, and videotape*. After the initial screening of the film, Park City was full of film fans, and more importantly, distributors trying to find a ticket to the movie. For the first time at the festival, tickets were being scalped for screenings to a film. Soderbergh's movie lost the Grand Jury Prize, Sundance's biggest award, but managed to win the Audience Prize because it "was the first Gen-X picture, taking shots at the predatory, suspender-wearing, Reagan-era yuppies" (Biskind 41). In other words, the young audience members and critics at the festival connected to the dark, sexual, and liberating nature of the film. *Sex, lies, and videotape* represented a change from the European-style art films of the twentieth century to the "American indie" (Biskind 41).

Steven Soderbergh's work generated the positive press the festival desperately needed, and it opened a new door for independent filmmakers. After the festival closed, independent distribution companies entered an intense bidding war for the rights to the film. Miramax, a distribution company owned by Harvey and Bob Weinstein, purchased the film and made an extraordinary \$25 million at the box office. The success of *sex, lies, and videotape* proved there was a market for these types of films—films that broke the guidelines of the "mega-blockbuster" and used creative and artistic techniques to tell their stories. The film's premiere at what is now the Sundance Film Festival was the festival's first true sign of long-lasting success and respect for the festival and institute. Because *sex, lies, and videotape* opened to such success at the festival and went on to larger success in distribution, the following year's festival continued to grow, with expectations that the festival would continue to introduce films of indie caliber (Biskind 82-86).

The 1990 and 1991 festivals did not provide the film industry with a sensation like *sex, lies, and videotape*. However, because of the success of Soderbergh's film, the festival picked up some momentum and a decent reputation in the film industry, making it known as "the place where films came from nowhere and turned into these huge things" (Biskind 105). In 1991, the United States Film Festival officially became known as the Sundance Film Festival, but the festival still needed more well-respected films that would help it build on its newfound momentum. At the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, the next *sex, lies, and videotape* premiered when future Academy Award-winner Quentin Tarantino entered Park City, Utah, with his first film *Reservoir Dogs*.

Reservoir Dogs was a violent story about crime in America, and it "gave the festival's imprimatur to a much different kind of indie feature, closer to the states of the barbarians (read, Americans) outside the gates of Park City---most fraught for the direction of the movement---potentially commercial" (Biskind 121). Described as "irreverent," *Reservoir Dogs* took what *sex, lies, and videotape* had done to the festival one step further. Like Soderbergh's piece, it broke many of Hollywood's "rules" for filmmaking and "cut the umbilical cord that had linked the indies...to their European art film predecessors" (Biskind 121). Like Soderbergh, Tarantino lost the Grand Jury Prize. However, *Reservoir Dogs* proved once again that Americans were interested in these kinds of films. Despite the violence, it pushed Tarantino to commercial success and generated more press for the festival, which just ten years prior was struggling to find its esteem in the American film culture.

In 1993, the Walt Disney Company purchased Miramax from the Weinstein brothers for sixty million dollars, a lower price than what the brothers expected.

However, the Weinsteins accepted the offer with the agreement that they would continue to manage the distribution company and have freedom over the selection of films purchased. This change in ownership meant that Miramax now had millions of Disney's dollars to spend on acquisitions. Miramax could now outbid every other company by two million dollars if necessary. The Weinsteins took full advantage by purchasing any independent movie they could find. This struck a nerve with independent distribution companies—they now feared that the films they wanted would be acquired by Miramax before other companies even had a chance to see them. That fear became reality, when at the 1994 Sundance Film Festival, the Weinsteins hired employees who could bribe filmmakers into letting them see their films before the start of the festival. Some of these employees were even sent to international destinations, giving Miramax the motto "Do anything, go anywhere to get your job done" (Biskind 157).

The 1994 Sundance Film Festival, the first with a Disney-owned Miramax, featured *Go Fish* and *Clerks* in the dramatic competition. *Go Fish* sold to Samuel Goldwyn Films for \$450,000. The price for the film was relatively low, especially by today's standards, but this sale was significant. For the first time, the Sundance Film Festival "turned totally into being about the deal" (Biskind 155). Now, instead of focusing on the merit of each film, distributors were jumping on every chance they could to purchase, especially if they could purchase it before the Weinsteins at Miramax. *Clerks*, a film by Kevin Smith, featured "testosterone-drenched trash-talk bent raunchily askew by Smith's twisted, adolescent sense of humor" (Biskind 161). There were little expectations for the movie to be a success, with much of the attention on *Go Fish*. Harvey Weinstein loved *Clerks*, though, and after missing his opportunity to purchase *Go*

Fish, paid \$227,000 for it. These two sales changed the future of the festival, causing it to become exactly what Redford did not want. The festival became a competition that attracted the stars of Hollywood.

The year of *Go Fish* and *Clerks* is often characterized as “the last year for genuine indies,” meaning films made by industry newcomers and those completely outside of the Hollywood system, because of a shift in expectations of the films premiered at Sundance (Biskind 164). With the business now booming at the festival, independent filmmakers had to step up the quality of writing, acting, editing, and directing, and the production values increased. However, *Go Fish* was the epitome of independent film. Made with an estimated \$15,000 with an inexperienced director, screenwriters, and actors, it served as the model Sundance film. In many ways, it still serves as the vision for which the Sundance Institute hopes. But when *Go Fish* was at the festival in 1994, it changed the business of the festival forever. The Sundance Film Festival is now not only a competition for the coveted Grand Jury Prize, but it is a competition for the distributor’s dollar. The purchasing of films during the festival became such the norm that in 2013, just nineteen years after *Go Fish*, twenty-six dramatic features and documentaries were sold during the festival’s ten days. The majority of films that were sold, though, looked somewhat different than *Go Fish*, causing many to still criticize the festival and institute for valuing commerce over art.

CHAPTER 3

FROM *FISH* TO *FRUITVALE*

Since the premiere of *sex, lies, and videotape* at the 1989 Sundance Film Festival, the festival has become synonymous with films that portray underrepresented people or explore important social issues. Though Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* did not directly address social issues, it took a risk by discussing something that most people still found taboo. By creating a dialogue about sexuality, the film allowed the Sundance Film Festival to open discussions on a variety of issues from race to sexual orientation. In this way, the Sundance Film Festival became an alternative to the Hollywood mega-blockbusters and formulaic films. The festival prides itself on its commitment to independence—"making films that challenge the dominant culture, making films that challenge the audience, making, in the words of independent producer Christine Vachon, 'films that matter'" (Ortner 30). The festival continues to market itself as an exhibitor of these politically important films as a way to stay important, edgy, and seemingly independent. However, while socially and politically important and dramatic films are often discussed heavily in the context of the Sundance Film Festival, when looking at the American films selected for exhibition and distribution, many of the films exhibited at the festival seem to follow the traditional Hollywood model.

In January 2013, *Fruitvale Station*, known then as simply *Fruitvale*, opened to strong reviews at the 29th Annual Sundance Film Festival. Two days after its opening at the festival and a round of bidding wars, The Weinstein Company acquired the film for an estimated \$2.5 million before the film went on to win both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award at the close of the festival. This was Coogler's first feature film and was funded through the labs of the Sundance Institute. Because of that and because it was a film that explored racial tensions in modern America, it became an instant sensation for the independent film festival—a controversial film the heads of the festival could tout as a culturally and socially-relevant success story of the Sundance labs. The film starred Michael B. Jordan as Oscar Grant III and Academy Award winner Octavia Spencer as his mother, and it tells the story of Grant, who was shot by a police officer in California. The film begins, though, with the actual cell phone footage of the shooting of Grant. The audience sees shaking and blurry images of a young black man protesting the treatment he is receiving and hears the shouting of those who are witnessing the tragic event. Then, Oscar is pinned to the floor as the cop pulls out his firearm. A gunshot is heard, and the images fade to black as the film begins to recount the final twenty-four hours of Grant's life.

The power of *Fruitvale Station* comes from Ryan Coogler's decision to not paint Oscar Grant as a saint or martyr. Instead, the film is “a bravely complex portrait of a man unjustly killed” (Bailey). It explores Oscar's past of drug dealing, infidelity, and anger. However, it also shows Oscar as a loving and attentive father—one who happily runs around playing tag with his daughter and promising to take her to Chuck E. Cheese on New Year's Day. As film critic Jason Bailey notes, Oscar is “capable of being both kind

and brutal, both honorable and troubling, both guilty and innocent.” Had this been a standard Hollywood studio film, though, Oscar Grant could have easily been made into a perfect person for the sake of storytelling. Studio films are often more interested in pleasing the audience than in exploring realism and depth of character. Even though the audience is only seeing the last day of Oscar’s life, they finish feeling as if they know him well.

Viewers of *Fruitvale Station* meet his mother, girlfriend, daughter, and friends. They learn what angers him, what makes him kind, what inspires him to leave behind his life of drug dealing, and how flawed he is. Like most independent films, *Fruitvale Station* has an “investment in realism aligning with an interest in character, and in particular with certain kinds of characters and characterizations” (Newman 89). When the film reaches the climactic scene of Oscar’s shooting, there is a stark contrast between the fictionalized version and the cell phone footage shown at the beginning. In the cell phone footage, it is difficult to see any details in Grant’s face because of the poor quality and the position of the officers around him. The footage is being shot by an onlooker from a significant distance. Coogler’s dramatized scene focuses more on Michael B. Jordan’s Grant. The audience sees the argument between the police officers and Grant up until the moment he is handcuffed on the concrete floor of the subway station. One officer reaches for his gun, and after an extremely quick image of the gunfire, the editing shifts the focus to a closeup of Grant’s face. The fear on Grant’s face is palpable, and the shouting stops and a light ringing begins as the audience sees the faces of those around Oscar, including his girlfriend who heard the gunshot but did not see it. Coogler then jumps back to Oscar who now has blood pouring from his mouth as he exclaims “You...you shot me!” In this

stressful and powerful scene, the audience is able to connect intimately with Oscar Grant III, a man they have gotten to know over the last hour. By looking into his eyes, viewers see everything there—the qualities that make him both virtuous and extremely flawed. Coogler chose this realistic view of Oscar Grant III very carefully, and it falls closely in line with the personalities of other characters in well-respected independent features. This emotional connection to Oscar Grant drew audiences to the film and allowed people to relate to Grant deeply.

When *Fruitvale Station* was purchased by The Weinstein Company, the country was in the midst of another racial profiling case. George Zimmerman had been accused of murdering 17-year-old black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida, but Zimmerman claimed he was acting out of self-defense. The week after Zimmerman was acquitted on murder and manslaughter charges in July of 2013, The Weinstein Company released *Fruitvale Station* in theaters (Bailey). The story of Oscar Grant III in the film had chilling and unmistakable parallels to the Martin/Zimmerman story playing out on CNN and MSNBC, showing that racial tension in America was still prevalent. Recognizing the parallel between the two widely-discussed incidents, The Weinstein Company was able to use the film as a way of commenting on the current state of America. In doing so, they garnered free press and spurred national discussion on what has and has not changed in the years between the two killings. The 2013 Sundance Film Festival exhibited a number of films that went on to find success at the box office, but none of them were discussed as much as *Fruitvale Station* because it was a well-made film with a great deal of relevance and commentary on racial politics.

The willingness of the Sundance Film Festival to explore social issues in *Fruitvale Station*, and more so, the eagerness of Hollywood companies to distribute the film can be traced to the 1994 Sundance Film Festival, when *Go Fish* was purchased at the festival for the first time and went on to have a successful post-Sundance life. Rose Troche's film *Go Fish* garnered a lot of attention by the end of the festival. Acquired for a small \$450,000 by Samuel Goldwyn Company, *Go Fish* follows a group of lesbian friends in Chicago as they try to set up their friends Max and Ely, even though the two do not seem to have much in common. *Go Fish* employs many fundamental characteristics associated with the term independent film—a term that “describes aesthetic and social distinctions” (Newman 6). The film lacks a traditional plot. Instead, the women spend their time discussing the difficulties of their lives: the challenges of being lesbian in 1994, their fears of getting into a relationship, and their desires to see their friends in happy relationships. The focus in *Go Fish* is on characters, especially ones that epitomize an often underrepresented group of people, and it uses politics and personal imagery to draw the audience closer to the women on the screen.

Like the racial issues explored in *Fruitvale Station*, *Go Fish* is important in what it does for lesbians and how it explores the social issues of this minority group. The film paints these women as human beings, avoiding the easy Hollywood stereotypes of lesbians and giving audience members a look into relationships they would not normally see in film. While the film does not explicitly ask audiences to make some sort of change, it challenges those that do not understand the LGBTQ community to consider how they are treated by society. They have explicit conversations about lesbian sex, bisexuality, and love. By opening up this dialogue in the film, *Go Fish* is providing much-needed

representation in the film industry for the LGBTQ community, best shown in a self-referential moment between Max and Ely in which the two argue about the representation of lesbians in a movie they saw. One believes it was not a fair portrayal of their lifestyle while the other seems happy just to have seen the relationship on screen. In the moment, the audience is indirectly asked to consider the lack of representation in Hollywood and how the film they are watching can contribute to that.

Aesthetically, *Go Fish* breaks quite a few Hollywood rules. First, the film is entirely in black and white, a technique rarely used in American cinema in 1994 and today. It also employs a framing technique of focusing on various body parts. Long shots of hands, torsos, and feet are used throughout the film while the women converse with one another. Transition shots also include images of hands, feet, pages of a book, eyes, and drinks being poured in a glass. These elements, and the film's minimal plot, all contribute to Newman's definition of independent cinema that challenges the norms of film aesthetics. In doing so, independent films such as *Go Fish* ask the audience to consider both Hollywood and political conventions and issues. *Go Fish* seems to be the perfect example of Sundance's mission. The film is inherently anti-Hollywood because it explores a homosexual relationship without a real plot or traditional happy ending. The distributors at Samuel Goldwyn recognized that a niche audience would respond to this type of unique film in art houses across the country.

Filmmakers at Sundance all want their films to have a life beyond the festival, but a successful run at Sundance does not guarantee any sort of success at the box office. When Disney purchased Miramax, other major Hollywood studios began purchasing independent distributors that could serve as their access to the independent sector.

Paramount Pictures opened Paramount Vantage; Warner Brothers opened Warner Independent Pictures; and Time Warner opened Picturehouse (Sickles). These major Hollywood studios began using their higher amounts of cash flow to beat independent (non-studio owned) distributors with the hopes that they would find a film that would 1) have a high amount of success at the box office or 2) bring their studio a number of highly coveted awards, especially Academy Awards, and with them, a well-respected reputation for the studio. If they were lucky, they may just be able to find some independent films at Sundance that brought both. However, these subsidies of major Hollywood studios created such a bidding war at the festivals that production costs of the films exhibited at Sundance were raised, and truly independent filmmakers were driven out of the festival. While these studios suffered greatly because of the 2008 economic crisis, they left a lasting effect on the Sundance Film Festival by implementing the three-tier system for purchasing films for distribution that is in place today (Sickles). First, films can be purchased at the festival, with distributors participating in bidding wars in Park City, Utah. Second, if films are not purchased during the festival, distributors can choose to purchase them in the few months following the close of the Sundance Film Festival. Third, films can be released by the filmmakers and producers in a variety of other ways: straight-to-DVD, through on demand or streaming services, or for purchase on a designated website. The daring and dark film *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* fell under the second category.

The works of Troche and Coogler suggest a strong interest in edgy and political films at Sundance, and Lee Daniels' 2009 film *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* could further indicate the attention to these types of independent movies.

However, that does not really seem to be the case. At the close of the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, the winner of the Grand Jury Prize, the Audience Award, and a Special Jury Award for supporting actress Mo’Nique had yet to be purchased. *Precious* starred an almost all-female cast of unknown black actresses, but it was not until after the awards ceremony that Lionsgate purchased the film for \$5 million with Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry leading the film’s promotional campaign (McClintock).

Similar to *Fruitvale Station* and *Go Fish*, *Precious* tells the story of a group frequently ignored in Hollywood. The film explores the tumultuous life of an illiterate and abused black teenage girl in Harlem who is pregnant with her second child from rape. *Precious* is difficult to watch. The realistic performances are heartbreaking, and the themes explored paint an ugly picture of life in Harlem. *Precious* addresses the disparities between black and white America by scrutinizing the living conditions, access to education and healthcare, and the complicated family life of a young black girl.

The audience is able to connect deeply with the character Precious. The film combines realism and dream sequences—known as playing with form to film scholar Michael Z. Newman—to tell the audience what she deals with on a daily basis and what she wishes her life was like. As Newman states, “the independent film spectator sees challenging form as a conceptual structure, such as a plot schema or character type, that defies one’s convention-bound expectations” (35). By experimenting with form through dream sequences, Daniels is breaking Hollywood conventions and asking viewers to delve further into Precious’ psyche. In one scene, Precious is shown looking at photographs, which begin to talk to her. These images tell her what she wants to hear—mainly that she is loved. In another scene, when Precious looks in a mirror, the girl

staring back at her is a thin, blonde, and glamorous girl. In these moments that break the traditional Hollywood mode of storytelling, the audience is intimately drawn to *Precious* through her deepest fears and biggest hopes. *Precious* represents a group of people who are highly misrepresented, both politically and in films. With films like *Precious*, *Fruitvale Station*, and *Go Fish*, “independent film offers an engagement with social reality, in the sense used by Marxists to refer to relations of power among social groups such as classes” (Newman 30). The Sundance Film Festival has allowed independent filmmakers to write, produce, and direct films that address important social and political issues that may not otherwise be examined in film. However, for every film like *Go Fish*, *Fruitvale Station*, and *Precious*, the recent years of the Sundance Film Festival seem to be overrun with films that do not stray too far from the standard Hollywood plots. Financial demands and greater competition for distribution companies dictate what is purchased at the festival because audiences “don’t want to see something that is really challenging, that’s in black and white, where the sound is difficult to make out” (Biskind 165). The films that tend to sell for higher amounts of money or that have become known as inherently “Sundance films” are the movies that film scholar Jeffrey Sconce calls “Smart Cinema,” often dubbed as a “quirky comedy-drama” film.

Quirky is difficult to define for film scholars, even though it is often used to describe independent comedy-dramas. However, many agree that “quirky” in relation to independent cinema implies that the films possess a “tone or sensibility that depends for its effect on a perception of its unusual, eccentric qualities...to distinguish itself against mainstream tone or sensibility or conventions of representations of characters and settings” (Newman 44). Similarly, Jeffrey Sconce describes Smart Cinema “as dark

comedy and disturbing drama born of ironic distance; all that is not positive and ‘dumb’” in which the films have “a shared set of stylistic, narrative and thematic elements deployed in different configurations” (358). While the term may difficult to define, it is easy to trace the roots of the Smart Cinema sub-genre back to a small film called *Clerks*, which premiered in 1994 alongside *Go Fish*. The film is known for its “lo-fi, on-the-cheap aesthetics” (Newman 44) and served as an example of “the very definition of an indie film, the kind of shoestring production that comes out of nowhere with no significant money behind it, lacks stars, production value, finesse, and a video deal” (Biskind 161). Written and directed by Kevin Smith, *Clerks* takes place over twenty-four hours and follows adult white men in New Jersey who are stuck in day jobs at local convenience and video stores. The film has almost no plot, and the characters do not undergo any significant changes by the end of the film. Typical studio films generally involve “simple stories about overcoming adversity” (Biskind 164). However, *Clerks* was the exact opposite. It was a simple story, of course, but the characters who spend the entire movie discussing how they want a different life never find that desired life. For distributors at the time, *Clerks* was different than anything they had seen before, and while they worked on building up their companies, they took risks by purchasing films like *Clerks*. However, with *Clerks* serving as a predecessor for the popular Smart Cinema, distribution companies at Sundance began to purchase films in this same style with the hope that these movies would turn a profit.

In 2006, one of the largest purchases in the history of the Sundance Film Festival was made when Fox Searchlight purchased *Little Miss Sunshine* for \$10.5 million. *Little Miss Sunshine* tells the story of a family who takes their young daughter Olive on a road

trip from New Mexico to California so she can participate in a beauty pageant. Her parents, older brother, uncle, and grandfather all hop into an old, yellow Volkswagen van to help her achieve her dreams. Each member of the family has their own particular quirks. The judgmental and difficult father is a motivation speaker, though he is not well-known or particularly good at his job. The son refuses to speak a word in an attempt to discipline himself for the Air Force. The gay uncle attempts suicide at the start of the film. The grandfather is a vulgar and unhappy drug addict who is sometimes too honest with his young granddaughter. By putting these characters in a van together, the movie gives a modern spin to the road-trip comedy classic *National Lampoon's Vacation*. *Little Miss Sunshine* is certainly more dramatic than *Vacation*, but in terms of independent films, "it's got very little new to bring to the party" (Longworth). Aside from Steve Carell's gay character, *Little Miss Sunshine* lacks any sort of diversity—diversity found in Sundance films like *Go Fish*, *Fruitvale Station*, and *Precious*. Instead, *Little Miss Sunshine* centers around a white, lower-middle-class, and unhappy family, perfectly aligning with the Smart Cinema "focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction" (Sconce 358).

Newman believes that independent films focus on character, play with standard film form, and are anti-Hollywood. However, *Little Miss Sunshine* does not follow any of those. While some could argue that the movie focuses on characters and the changes these people go through on their day-long road trip, the family members lack the deep transformation or characterization of other independent films like *sex, lies, and videotape*, *Precious*, and *Fruitvale Station*. *Little Miss Sunshine* is also a standard linear film, with no challenge to the way stories are told in traditional Hollywood films. By the time the

film reaches its ending (after the grandfather has died, just like the elderly aunt in *National Lampoon's Vacation*), the family comes together in support of Olive. They join her on stage at the pageant and dance their hearts out to the song "Superfreak," leaving audiences satisfied with a traditional Hollywood ending.

Little Miss Sunshine's success is only one example of the type of film that has now become the norm. Smart Cinema films like *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), *500 Days of Summer* (2009), and *The Kids are All Right* (2010) all found success after premiering at the Sundance Film Festival, and with each film in this vein that premieres at Sundance, audiences come to expect this type of film as the norm of independent cinema. Seven years after the Sundance premiere of *Little Miss Sunshine*, a film called *The Way, Way Back* (which was produced by the same team as *Little Miss Sunshine*) was purchased at Sundance for \$9.75 million, also by Fox Searchlight. Another recent addition to the Smart Cinema genre, *The Way, Way Back* is a coming-of-age story written and directed by Academy Award winners Jim Rash and Nat Faxon. The film was considered a Sundance success with its high purchase, but "the film always was expected to land at Searchlight, which has a relationship with directors Nat Faxon and Jim Rash" causing many to wonder why the film had to premiere at Sundance prior to its purchase (Miller and Siegel). It follows a 14-year-old boy, Duncan, who is forced to spend a summer at the beach with his mother, her insolent and emotionally abusive boyfriend, and his daughter. Duncan has difficulties interacting with children his age and begins a friendship with Owen, the manager of the local water park. Owen hires Duncan for the summer, and through his job and friendship with Owen, Duncan is able to grow out of his shell.

Like its predecessor, *The Way, Way Back* feels Hollywood. Duncan sadly departs the beach town and says goodbye to the first true friends he has ever had, but the ending is hopeful and happy. His mother finally leaves her boyfriend, and it is implied that life is about to be easier because of the changes Duncan went through over the summer. The characterization once again feels superficial, and Rash and Faxon take very few risks in their filmmaking. *The Way, Way Back* and *Little Miss Sunshine* were purchased for a much larger amount of money than films like *Fruitvale Station* and *Precious*, and when comparing the films, it is easy to see why. The quirky comedies have become blockbuster hits, with *Little Miss Sunshine* making over \$59 million at the domestic box office and *The Way, Way Back* grossing over \$21 million. They feel just independent enough so that audiences feel a sense of pride when they can say they have seen them, but they do not actually do much to challenge Hollywood or formulaic filmmaking. In fact, “they barely make a ripple, and intentionally so, since each ripple might threaten possible revenue” (Newman 244). As competition has evolved and grown, the movies purchased have been selected because of little risk and the potential for a high return-on-investment. While the Smart Cinema trend may have seen its beginnings with *Clerks* in 1994, the films with that label today contrast greatly with the low budget, raunchy, and plotless *Clerks*.

In 2014, the Sundance Film Festival celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in Park City, Utah, and the American films that premiered there continued to propel Sundance towards Hollywood. On opening night, *Whiplash*, a film about a drummer at a prestigious music conservatory, premiered to rave reviews. At the close of the festival, it was, not surprisingly, awarded the Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award. *Whiplash*, while not a “quirky comedy” in the style of *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Way, Way Back*, still

closely aligns with the Hollywood studio formula of filmmaking. As Sundance has evolved over thirty years, it is clear that the festival is no longer giving audiences the edgy and daring films they do not know they want. Instead, many distributors are leaning more towards commercialized films, leading Sundance in the same direction.

CHAPTER 4

SUNDANCE: THIRTY YEARS LATER

On January 16, 2014, Robert Redford participated in a press conference to kick off the Sundance Film Festival. Redford was excited to discuss the unexpected success of the festival and how the festival has stayed true to its mission of providing an outlet for creative and unique independent films. In fact, Kari Putnam, the Sundance Institute executive director who joined Redford at the press conference, said “I don’t think the mission of Sundance has changed; it exists to support the voices of artists, to get their stories told and seen...It’s grown up, but the mission has stayed the same” (Means and Stephenson). However, it is still easy to see why the festival is frequently criticized for becoming too Hollywood. The festival has a large number of corporate sponsors who are looking to spread their brand to the tens of thousands of festival-goers, and it is “now known for celebrity-spotting as much as serious film-watching” (Mattson). Oscar winners and television stars now frequently star in the films in the U.S. Dramatic Competition and Premieres categories. To name just a few examples, in 2014, Academy Award winner Philip Seymour Hoffman starred in *God’s Pocket* and *A Most Wanted Man*; Academy Award winner Anne Hathaway starred in *Song One*; Academy Award nominee Anna Kendrick starred in *Happy Christmas*, *Life After Beth*, and *The Voices*; Emmy winner Aaron Paul starred in *Hellion*; and Golden Globe winner and Emmy nominee Elisabeth Moss starred in *The One I Love* and *Listen Up Philip*. This increase in

Hollywood celebrities lead many to believe the festival is specifically “marketing to a segmented audience that wants to feel it’s receiving more serious fare than what Hollywood offers” (Mattson), even if they may not actually be doing so. Nevertheless, after further research and a look at the numbers, the reason behind Sundance’s switch to a broader appeal may not be the fault of those in charge of the festival or the Sundance Institute. Instead, the distributors have begun to dictate the independent marketplace and the decisions made by Sundance’s film selection committee.

The Sundance Film Festival continues to grow more competitive each year. In 2014, 12,218 feature full-length and short films were submitted for selection, but in 2010, only 9,816 were submitted. Of the 4,057 feature full-length film submissions, only 119 movies played at the festival (Lang). With Sundance now regarded as one of the top five film festivals in the world, the selection committee must take great lengths to ensure that they are picking high-quality films that will also draw the necessary audience. Because the festival helps bring funding to the Sundance Institute and the film labs that still provide a creative home for truly independent and up-and-coming artists, the selection of films with independent qualities at the festival is often put aside for the success of the organization as a whole. With audiences and distributors wanting to see films that share qualities with *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Way, Way Back* instead of *Go Fish*, the festival has naturally progressed toward more commercial films. Along with this rise of Smart Cinema films, female directors and directors of color have been further pushed out of Sundance. While 2014 was considered a slow year for acquisitions (only a few were purchased during the festival), the feature films purchased, including *Whiplash*, were more like a commercial Hollywood film in narrative structure.

Whiplash is about a college student, Andrew, at the best music conservatory in the nation. However, Andrew has an antagonistic professor who is set on pushing the students beyond their capabilities towards perfection. Professor Terrence Fletcher spends his time in the film ruining Andrew's life, and Andrew makes it his mission to impress the abusive professor. By the film's end, the professor manages to convince Andrew that he has changed his ways. By acting pleasant and apologizing to Andrew, Professor Fletcher is able to manipulate him into performing at a concert where he intends to exact revenge on him. Andrew realizes halfway through the concert that Fletcher is trying to sabotage him. In a rousing final scene, Andrew is able to play the drums and essentially defeat his professor in a way that feels similar to the happy endings of Hollywood films. The focus on character in *Whiplash* matches a feature common of independent film. However, when compared to films like *sex, lies, and videotape*, *Go Fish*, and *Clerks*, it is easy to see that the landscape of independent films has changed over the last thirty years of the Sundance Film Festival to a more traditional film structure with a higher production value and more of a polished, commercial aesthetic.

However, *Whiplash* is also an example of a film that Sundance did help. In 2013, Damien Chazelle premiered his short film of the same name. After receiving positive attention for his short film, Chazelle was able to secure funding to turn *Whiplash* into a full-length feature film, and he did so in “the fastest turnaround from short to feature” Sundance has ever seen” (Means and Stephenson). Chazelle credits his ability to complete the film he wanted to the festival, saying, “Without Sundance, this movie wouldn't have happened in the first place” (Means and Stephenson). *Whiplash* is certainly not the first film to begin as a short at the festival. In fact, two other films in the

2014 U.S. Dramatic Competition with *Whiplash* began as Sundance shorts: *Hellion* and *Fishing Without Nets*. While the Sundance Film Festival has evolved to include more commercial films over the last thirty years, Sundance is still providing a place for the exhibition of some films by independent and up-and-coming artists.

Sundance does succeed over Hollywood in the arena of female filmmakers. However, the overall picture for female filmmakers in both the independent sector and in Hollywood is unimpressive. In 2013, the Sundance Institute and Women in Film Los Angeles (WIF) conducted and released a study of full-length feature films in exhibition at the Sundance Film Festival from 2002-2012. The research “analyzed, across many categories, the percentage of Sundance films directed, written, produced, filmed, and edited by women” in an effort to see how male-dominated the film industry really was. The results were far from perfect, indicating that of the narrative Sundance films of the ten-year period, only 16.9% were directed by women while 34.5% of documentaries were. These numbers are hardly representative of the population distribution between males and females. In 2014, with 119 feature films in the festival, 29% were directed by women. However, this is a great achievement for Sundance over the Hollywood studios—the study also found that only 4.4% of the top 100 box office films over the ten years were directed by women (Lurie). So, while Sundance supports more female filmmakers compared to the major Hollywood studios, the distributors are once again failing because they tend to assume that women do not see films as often as men and that men do not want to see films created by and starring women. This has become such an issue that actress Cate Blanchett dedicated her Oscar speech for Best Actress in 2014 to this problem thanking Sony Classics

for so bravely and intelligently distributing the film and to the audiences who went to see it and perhaps those of us in the industry who are still foolishly clinging to the idea that female films with women at the center are niche experiences. They are not. Audiences want to see them and, in fact, they earn money. The world is round, people. (Selby)

According to a list of 2014 Sundance films acquired by February 11, 2014, only five of the twenty-two narrative features purchased for distribution at the Sundance Film Festival were directed by women (Knegt and Smith). Some of the most-talked about films of the festival by female directors, including the fan and critic favorite *Hellion*, were not purchased during the festival—*Hellion* was not acquired by Sundance Selects until the end of February 2014 (McNary).

Another major festival film—*Dear White People*, written and directed by a black man named Justin Simien—was not purchased until two months after its Sundance Film Festival premiere. *Dear White People* tells the story of a group of black university students who fight back against racism and stereotypes on their college campus. Politically and socially charged like *Fruitvale Station*, *Dear White People* is a satirical comedy that works to shed light on the racial tension that still exists throughout the country today. From just the concept trailer alone, the influences of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* on Simien are clear. From the first line of the trailer, it is also easy to see why distributors hesitated to acquire the rights to the film: "Forget Hollywood and forget Tyler Perry! Can we get a movie with, you know, characters in them instead of stereotypes wrapped up in Christian dogma?" (Cheney-Rice). By drawing attention to the unrealistic and underrepresentation of black characters in Hollywood, *Dear White People*

is a risky endeavor. The film lacks any Hollywood stars, and because it is a comedy, will probably not rake in major award nominations, which is probably why many distributors were staying away from the film. A film like *Fruitvale Station*, purchased when the country was facing a similar tragedy, was sure to bring a parallel that distributors could use to strategically market and release the film. However, as the so-called independent distributors (read, those owned by major Hollywood studios) acquire films, they are failing to see the value in diversity of race, gender, and genre that Sundance offers in films like *Hellion* and *Dear White People*. Instead, they are continuing to purchase more commercial films that have little to no diversity and that appear safe, which have dominated the film industry since its inception. However, Redford claims that the Sundance Film Festival has never been concerned with the distribution business of the films. He has often been criticized for this stance, and while he says that he always hopes the films will find their audience, he also says “it’s not our business” (Means and Stephenson). With Sundance out of the distribution, the responsibility to help independent filmmakers falls to those making the acquisitions—the major studio executives are rarely willing to take chances now because profit is becoming more important with growing competition and a declining economy.

One walk down Main Street in Park City, Utah, will illustrate how the festival is more commercial. Paparazzi crowd the streets in the hopes of snapping pictures of celebrities, and each building is hosting a different exclusive party for the rich and famous each night of the festival. The Slamdance Film Festival, which began in 1995, is held at the same time every year as Sundance in Park City. This festival was created specifically to exhibit films that had been rejected from Sundance or that were more

artistic and experimental than those at Sundance. As distributors continue to change the landscape of Sundance and independent cinema, independent filmmakers who were once able to turn to the Sundance Film Festival for the exhibition of their work are now using other venues to exhibit their films and find an audience. One festival that is quickly becoming a home for independent filmmakers is the South by Southwest Film Festival, which began in Austin, Texas, in 1987 but has recently drawn attention for the exhibition of independent films like 2013's *Short Term 12*. One producer of *Short Term 12*, Asher Goldstein says, "I definitely think there are other venues for films to find distribution, whether Tribeca, Fantastic Fest or other regional festivals, from Little Rock to Seattle, where filmmakers are announcing a presence to distributors" (Kaufman). Joe Swanberg, who made his first trip to Sundance in 2014 with his film *Happy Christmas*, believes that while "the Sundance stamp of approval is meaningful to distributors, to press, to audiences and to other filmmakers" (Kaufman), that certainly does not have to be the first way to find success. Prior to having his film selected in the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, Swanberg premiered multiple films at South by Southwest and credits that festival with launching his career. Once he was discovered there, it became easier for him to acquire funding for his films and then go on to his premiere at Sundance.

Alex Ross Perry, who premiered his film *Listen Up Philip* at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, was rejected from the festival in 2011 with his film *The Color Wheel*. After the rejection from Sundance, Perry screened the film at forty-five different festivals, starting with the Sarasota Film Festival. With enough notice from critics and distributors at those various festivals, the film was distributed theatrically. Perry calls the independent film circuit a "game," and now says the game is no longer over when a filmmaker is

rejected from Sundance. Eventually, Perry says, “I was at the Independent Spirit Awards, where all these Hollywood people saw a clip from a movie I made with six friends for the price of a used car...So that’s one way to win the game” (Kaufman). With the growing number of festival outlets, the Sundance Film Festival no longer has to be the only answer for independence. However, as those other festivals draw larger crowds and distributors looking for inexpensive purchases that would turn a high profit, those alternative festivals may follow down the same commercial path as Sundance.

Luckily for up-and-coming filmmakers, the Internet is now providing a different and more accessible home. As the Internet continues to grow, sites like Netflix and YouTube are giving a voice to the once voiceless filmmakers and artists. While streaming sites and video on demand (VOD) sites are not going to bring in the high dollars that a festival distribution deal would, “more and more filmmakers are starting to respect the VOD model as they value quick delivery in the generation of social media” (Stewart and Setoodeh). These VOD websites allow directors and screenwriters to self-distribute their films in a way that was not available when Sundance first started. At a panel called Women in Film on January 21, 2014, Mamrie Hart discussed her success as a YouTube video personality. Hart hosts a weekly show called “You Deserve a Drink,” which has amassed hundreds of thousands of subscribers. Hart enjoys her YouTube show because she says “Being able to make your own content is so empowering.” However, when she and her friends (other YouTube stars Hannah Hart and Grace Helbig) wanted to make a film, they struggled to find financing. In order to convince investors that they deserved the funds, the three women used YouTube statistics to prove they had a loyal subscriber list who would watch the film. On February 14, 2014, the three released their film *Camp*

Takota on their website and on iTunes. Hart, Hart, and Helbig certainly are not the first filmmakers to release their movies online. As the method continues to prove successful, more and more filmmakers can jumpstart their careers on the Internet before finding success at the Sundance Film Festival and with traditional Hollywood distributors. However, theatrical distribution is still preferred for filmmakers because Internet distribution makes little money comparatively. While the Internet could give filmmakers their start, filmmakers need the return on investment to continue producing their films.

Alex Ross Perry said “It would be great if we could just let the work speak for itself, but it’s just not where the culture is anymore” (Kaufman). The competition in the film industry is constantly growing, and with technology prices decreasing, it is becoming easier for people to make films at their home with a small camera. Because of distributors at the Sundance Film Festival and the need for the Sundance Institute to draw attention and big crowds, the festival has deterred a bit from its original mission. Hollywood has an expanding presence each year at Sundance, and over the course of the next few years, film audiences, critics, and distributors will feel the impact of the Internet as a launchpad for careers more and more at the festival. With other outlets for independent filmmakers than Sundance, the Hollywood ascendancy over the Sundance Film Festival will more than likely continue.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When Disney purchased Miramax in 1993, distribution of the films at the Sundance Film Festival became even more competitive. The Weinstein brothers were given millions of dollars from Disney to purchase films, and in the following year, the effects of that purchase were felt at the festival. *Go Fish* was purchased while the festival was still open, marking the first time that this happened. This form of purchasing became a norm for the festival over the next twenty years.

In the early years of the Sundance Film Festival, the independent films selected for exhibition were daring and provocative films that pushed back against Hollywood. While independent film is difficult to define, the ones screened at the festival followed one of the most important aspects of the term. They were anti-Hollywood and allowed filmmakers outside of the studio system to produce the films they truly wanted to make. These filmmakers had the creative control that they would not have had at a Hollywood studio. However, between the takeover of the festival by the Sundance Institute and the distributors becoming competitive at the festival, business changed. The Sundance Film Festival became a money-maker to keep the Sundance Institute running, and in doing so, affected the programming the festival board chose.

Distributors were excited to see the films change to the Hollywood-style movies that would turn a profit. Over the last thirty years, star power at the festival has risen.

John Slattery debuted his first feature film, *God's Pocket*, at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival in the U.S. Dramatic Competition category. However, Slattery is an Emmy-nominated actor on the popular television drama *Mad Men*, where he has also directed five episodes. Slattery is hardly outside of the Hollywood system and yet was selected for the festival lineup. Slattery spoke at a panel at the 2014 festival about the difficulties of independent filmmaking, and one of the major issues he discussed was that a certain actor without star power “isn’t going to get you the money you need.” Luckily for him, Slattery’s film starred Academy Award winner Philip Seymour Hoffman, Academy Award nominee Richard Jenkins, and Emmy nominee Christina Hendricks, and his film was hardly the only one to star Hollywood celebrities.

Sundance has become an exciting place for celebrities to visit every year, but the draw of celebrities comes from those who are spending their millions of dollars on the distribution of films each year. Distribution companies continue to purchase “independent” films that have mass appeal with the hope that these movies will have a strong life after the festival. Films without such appeal are often left at the festival, causing true independent filmmakers with no connections to Hollywood to turn to other outlets for exhibition. As the Sundance Film Festival grows, this change to a more commercial appeal will as well. With the competition for exhibition at the festival increasing each year, the Sundance programmers will continue to select films that will bring the biggest audience to Park City, Utah, so they can support the nonprofit work of the Sundance Institute.

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